

LITERATURE CIRCLES GO DIGITAL

Karen Bromley ■ Michelle Faughnan ■ Susan Ham ■ Melissa Miller ■ Traci Armstrong
■ Cassandra Crandall ■ Julia Garrison ■ Nicholas Marrone

Blending online research with face-to-face classroom discussion can change traditional literature circles in ways that foster research using digital resources, comprehension, and literary analysis.

In the past, the university students in my (Karen's; first author) children's literature class read books, wrote responses according to their selected literature circle roles, and shared their responses in small group discussions (Daniels, 2002). This time, however, my purpose was for these graduate literacy education students to read *Al Capone Shines My Shoes* (2009) and use "multimodal and digitally based resources" (Serafini & Youngs, 2013) to complete literature circle roles and discuss the book.

The assignment this time was to "use the Internet to complete your literature circle role." I asked students to bring printed copies of their Internet work to class to share using our classroom's document camera. The students had not participated in this type of literature circle previously and were eager to try this hybrid approach, which would blend online research with face-to-face classroom discussion. I wanted them to use technology to increase their access to topics related to the book through research on the Internet, and I wanted to expand the range of modes they might use for communicating their responses to the book.

So, each of the seven students took a different role, read the book, completed his or her role outside of

class using the Internet, and shared their results in class. The following article describes literature circles, the book we read, themes drawn from the students' explanations of the multimodal assignment, a discussion of the results, and suggestions for classroom teachers who are interested in trying digital literature circles.

Before giving this assignment, I had read about the possibility of digitally based assignments

Karen Bromley is a SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor at Binghamton University, New York, USA; e-mail kbromley@binghamton.edu.

Michelle Faughnan is a literacy graduate student at Binghamton University; e-mail mfaughn1@binghamton.edu.

Susan Ham is a literacy graduate student at Binghamton University; e-mail sham2@binghamton.edu.

Melissa Miller is a literacy graduate student at Binghamton University; e-mail mmiller7@binghamton.edu.

Traci Armstrong is a literacy graduate student at Binghamton University; e-mail Traci.armstrong@yahoo.com.

Cassandra Crandall is a literacy graduate student at Binghamton University; e-mail ccranda3@binghamton.edu.

Julia Garrison is a literacy graduate student at Binghamton University; e-mail jgarris2@binghamton.edu.

Nicholas Marrone is a literacy graduate student at Binghamton University; e-mail nmarron1@binghamton.edu.

replacing traditional, paper-and-pencil book reports (Serafini & Youngs, 2013; Siegel, 2012; Whitin, 2009). I had also read evidence that composing in different modes engages students in learning content and develops their literary analysis skills (Grisham & Wolsey, 2006).

In fact, technology, media, and multimodal responses offer students “flexible options for developing and expressing their understanding and affective response to literary and informational texts” (Dalton & Grisham, 2013, p. 221). There is ample evidence that “remixing” traditional instruction with multimodal texts and new literacies results in active, engaged, and motivated learners (Lapp, Moss, & Rowsell, 2012).

Additionally, multimodal response activities provide ways to support the literacy achievement of struggling readers (Dalton & Grisham, 2013; Siegel, 2012). So, this assignment was a way to have my students change up traditional literature circles with the addition of a digital, multimodal component that could also develop the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) for technology and digital literacy.

While technology is not a separate area of the CCSS, digital literacy is a common element in the standards for reading and writing (Dalton, 2012). Expectations in the CCSS overview state that students should be able to “use technology and digital media strategically and capably for reading, composing, and learning” (p. 5). The CCSS expect students to be able to “Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects...to demonstrate understanding of subjects under investigation” (p. 26).

Additionally, technology is mentioned specifically in Anchor Standards 6–8 for reading, writing, and research. Thus, using technology to explore *Al Capone Shines My Shoes* was a way to show students how to meet these expectations and also use their digital skills, expand their range of response modes, and carry out research they might not normally do.

Literature Circles

Literature circles are small peer-led discussion groups whose members read the same story, poem, article, or book and have a structure to support them as they discuss ideas within and around a text (Daniels, 2002). Literature circles vary by teacher, students, purpose, and content area. The notion is that good literature promotes reading, natural dialogue, and “grand conversations” (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). Thus, roles are usually dropped once participants begin to converse personally and naturally.

These book “clubs” are used successfully with diverse learners to promote independent reading and substantive talk about books (Day, Spiegel, McLellan, & Brown, 2002). They are used in social studies to promote the understanding of difficult content concepts (McCall, 2010). Older students might even adapt their roles

to film, with ideas from “Literature Circle Roles Reframed: Reading as a Film Crew” (Fink, 2005). Roles become Director, Casting Director, Dialogue Director, etc.

The Book

Set in 1935 on the island of Alcatraz, *Al Capone Shines My Shoes* is the story of 12-year-old Moose Flanagan, who lives there with his family and the families of other prison guards. One of the prisoners, Al Capone, does a favor in secret for Moose, and Moose is frightened when Al wants something in return. The book contains themes of friendship, family loyalty, and responsibility, and the story is told from the perspective of a young male main character. On the book’s back cover, *School Library Journal* says it is “...superlative historical fiction” and *Kirkus Reviews* calls it a “solid-gold sequel” to Newbery Honor book *Al Capone Does My Shirts* (2007). Thus, it seemed like a worthwhile book for the class to read.

Student Reflections

Each student chose a literature circle role (see Figure 1), read the book, and completed the role using the Internet. Students shared the results of their research in class using a document camera to display their findings on a large screen. After sharing and discussion, for homework I asked students to write answers to “What did you do digitally?” and “What did you learn?” Four themes emerged from an analysis of the written answers to both questions. Representative excerpts to support each theme and a discussion follow.

Theme 1: Breadth of Digital Research

Each of the seven students used the Internet and/or a form of technology to research his or her role in a different

Pause and Ponder

- Do students have access to a form of technology at home to complete a digital assignment? If not, can you allot time for them to complete the assignment at school?
- How might students’ knowledge of technology (or lack thereof) affect this assignment?
- How can you modify digital assignments for English learners and students with special needs?

Figure 1 Literature Circle roles created for use with elementary-age students

Discussion Director: Create at least three “thinking” questions (how and/or why) about the story and lead the discussion.

Illustrator: Draw a picture, diagram, or graphic organizer with at least five words as labels to show something that happened.

Investigator: Find information about the story, setting, author, illustrator, or anything else that is related and important.

Literary Luminary: Find funny, favorite, powerful, or special parts and read them aloud.

Mapmaker: Create an action map or diagram that tracks what happened and describes the setting.

Connector: Make connections between the book and the outside world (authors, characters, people, places, events, or other books).

Vocabulary Enricher: Find new, important, or interesting words and consult a dictionary to find their meanings.

Summarizer: Write a paragraph or make a list that is a brief summary or overview of the main ideas and events in the story.

organizer, and I chose two main conflicts in the novel to illustrate causes and effects.”

- Melissa (Investigator): “I visited several websites and finally came upon a reliable website managed by the History Channel that provided more information than I ever knew existed about Alcatraz. I chose a few pages to print and share with the class.”
- Traci (Literary Luminary): “I read the book on my Kindle. I highlighted quotes and page numbers and saved them in the Notes section of my Kindle. Then I shared these quotes

way. Six students accessed websites, and two of the seven students used other digital resources as well (websites and digital resources cited by students are listed in Appendix A):

- Cassie (Discussion Director): “I accessed two Alcatraz websites that had a lot of useful information, including a map and other images of what life was like on Alcatraz.”
- Nick (Mapmaker): “I found maps of California (see Figure 2), San Francisco, and Alcatraz Island. I found databases that gave me information to share on the state, city, and island, such as area, population, location, and years of operation as a prison.”
- Susan (Vocabulary Enricher): “I found meanings and images on the Internet for six words that are used frequently throughout the text but not regularly used in schools or daily conversations.” (See Figure 3 for *bar spreader* and Figure 4 for *crawl space*.)
- Julia (Illustrator): “I used Kidspiration, a student- and teacher-friendly online program... I found a cause-and-effect graphic

Figure 2 A map can make the setting of a book real

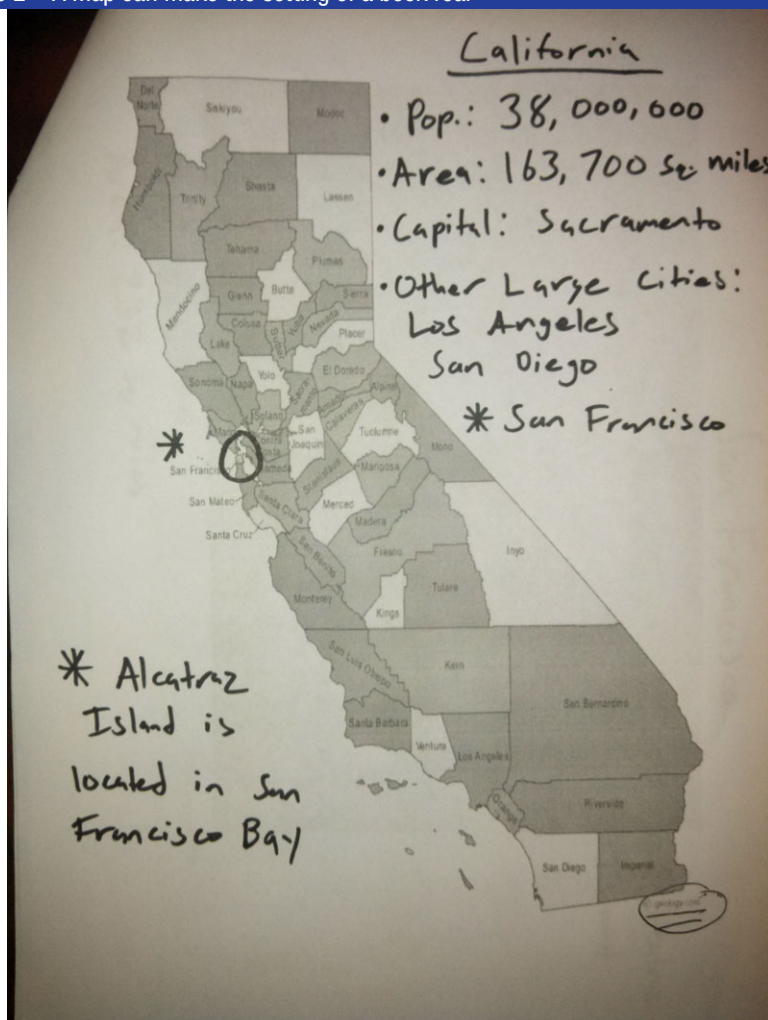


Figure 3 *Bar spreader*: a device used by prisoners to try to escape. It works by applying pressure between two bars of a cell, bending them far enough apart that the prisoner can slip through the space created and out of the cell



on my Twitter account. Last, I copied and pasted the quotes and page numbers from Twitter to Microsoft Word. This allowed me to provide supporting details about my role and share what I found with the class."

- Michelle (Summarizer): "I used Glogster to create a multimedia glog for the book. On Amazon, I selected

a catchy summary that also served as a promotional text [posted with attribution]. I found quotes from book reviews in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Sacramento Bee*, and *The San Jose Mercury News*. I also added a YouTube video titled 'Book Trailer: *Al Capone Shines My Shoes*.' So my classmates could see my glog, I sent them the hyperlink. There is a QR scan code at the bottom of the glog that allows anyone with a smartphone to scan it and open it on their phone."

Theme 2: Curiosity to Dig Deeper

All seven students said they wanted to know more about the story, especially the setting and characters. Technology seemed to provide the motivation and means for students to expand their research. Three quotes show this:

- Cassie (Discussion Director): "I wanted to know more about what it was like for the families living on

Alcatraz. It sparked my interest and allowed me to do further research on the lives of families living on Alcatraz."

- Michelle (Summarizer): "I became curious about the real Al Capone and the real Alcatraz. What did he do that was so bad? What did he look like? How much of the story was based on fact? I searched the Internet for articles, pictures, and websites to find answers. I also remembered a friend who had visited Alcatraz. I knew he had a picture of himself in an Alcatraz cell on his Facebook page. So, I found the picture on my iPhone and showed it to everyone with the doc cam."
- Melissa (Investigator): "I wanted to gather some background information about the island. What I thought was going to take me about 10 minutes wound up turning into at least an hour because of all the different aspects of the website I wanted to explore."

Figure 4 *Crawl space*: a space under the ground floor or roof of a building that is not high enough for a person to stand up in



Theme 3: Enhanced Understanding of the Book

All seven students said they had a better understanding of the story because of their ability to use digital resources. They were pushed to learn more about the book, and the result was better comprehension and appreciation of the story.

- Cassie (Discussion Director): "I learned a lot more about the story by going online. It was an opportunity for me to find information the author had not fully described, and it made reading the book a lot more interesting."
- Nick (Mapmaker): "We could dive more deeply into the themes, implications, and plot of the story vbook and our own interpretations as resources for

“Teach students how to determine if a website is reliable or not before beginning Internet searches and gathering quality information.”

comprehension. I wanted to use the lens of geography to help contextualize our understanding and give the class a bird’s eye view so we could best comprehend the geography of the story. My classmates’ presentations improved my comprehension and created a literary schema for me.”

- Traci (Literary Luminary): “This project pushed me to go beyond what I had imagined...and I expanded my role as Literary Luminary. The quotes I found suggested themes, and so I Googled to find images to represent my themes.”
- Susan (Vocabulary Enricher): “Taking on this role enhanced my interpretation of the novel. I received a clear visual image of the setting, characters, and their roles. I was more interested in the history of Alcatraz and the lives of the inmates.”

As well as writing about the opportunity to extend their learning using digital resources, two students also wrote about the importance of being critical in this venture.

- Melissa (Investigator): “This project also reinforced for me that information from the Internet is not always reliable... I learned that it is important to have a way to digitally share the products of digital literature circles. The lack of technology in the room where our class met made it difficult for me to justify my role as

uniquely digital. It would have been more meaningful had I been able to pull up the website on the screen or on a SMART Board so everyone could interact with it in the same way I had.”

- Michelle (Summarizer): “The digital process made me become picky in selecting a review from the Internet. While I searched for a book review to use, I read at least 10 reviews before I finally chose one. I was critical of the reviews I read and wanted to make sure I found one that I felt accurately portrayed the book.”

Theme 4: Connection to Teaching

Five of the seven students connected their digital literature circle experience to teaching future students. They wrote about technology and multimedia as a way to provide instruction to students with varying strengths and needs.

- Julia (Illustrator): “This can be beneficial for all students, especially those who don’t consider themselves artistic. This is a great way to engage different types of students. I might never have realized just how easily visual representations can be created digitally. Using Kidspiration gave me a new perspective on ways to explore and utilize an online program to be the Illustrator.”
- Nick (Mapmaker): “I believe this is also a good way for students to become interested in geographical information. This knowledge will be useful for my future students

who can use what they have learned from this map activity to acquire and interpret future map and geography information.”

- Melissa (Investigator): “I knew what to look for in websites to deem them reliable. However, all students might not have those skills, and it would be necessary to teach students how to determine if a website is reliable or not before beginning their Internet searches and gathering quality information.”
- Susan (Vocabulary Enricher): “This exercise is also a great way to introduce children to new books in order to pique their interests. It gives children a small window of the book to look into and will spark curiosity while stimulating them in a pedagogic way.”
- Michelle (Summarizer): “This project used our skills and allowed us to expand our literature circle roles in different ways...and select a technological medium that was best suited for each of us. Each person chose a slightly different way to present their information, and not a single presentation was the same. For this reason, I think this kind of digital work would be a great way to differentiate instruction for kids.”

Discussion

Overall, I was pleased with this assignment. The students incorporated multimodal and digital resources in new and different ways to share, discuss, and analyze *Al Capone Shines My Shoes*. The assignment offered these students an option besides traditional literature circles (Serafini & Youngs, 2013) and a way to extend previous notions of multimodal response to literature (Whitin, 2009). The digital work also engaged students in developing their

comprehension and literary analysis of a text (Dalton & Grisham, 2013).

What surprised me about students' use of technology was the variety of digital media students employed to research and share information and visual images. In this regard, students may have learned how to use tools they had not previously considered. For example, students used Internet search engines, visited websites, found databases, accessed online programs and dictionaries, found images and newspaper book reviews, created a glog, and used a Kindle, a smartphone, a QR scan code, and a classroom document camera. Additionally, I was surprised to see social media like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube used as students brought their out-of-school literacies into the classroom.

Students were creative and went beyond what I thought they might do in ways not possible in a typical literature circle discussion. For example, Julia (Illustrator) created an electronic graphic organizer rather than drawing a picture, which is what she might typically have done. Nick (Mapmaker) searched the Internet for maps that "zoomed in" from California to Alcatraz Island to give us a clear understanding of the area's geography and demographics rather than making a hand-drawn map. Traci (Literary Luminary) extended her role description by finding themes and Internet images to represent them. Susan (Vocabulary Enricher) identified unique words, found online dictionary definitions and images for each word,

and gave examples of the words' use in the story.

The sharing and talk that occurred as a result of the digital research seemed richer than literature circle discussions in previous classes. While the questions posed by Cassie (Discussion Director) started the talk and the observations made by Michelle (Summarizer) concluded the conversation, there were many spontaneous interjections that created a natural conversation, similar to traditional literature circles. However, as students talked, they supported their discussion of the literary elements (setting, character development, themes, plot, and style) with multimodal evidence.

There was back-and-forth dialogue among students as one person's research brought up or confirmed something someone else discovered. For example, as Melissa (Investigator) shared her findings, Cassie (Discussion Director) and Michelle (Summarizer) chimed in with similar findings from their research. Later, Cassie wrote, "I learned a lot more about the story by going online," and Melissa wrote, "If I only had to do research and write it down, I might simply have used the author's notes in the back of the book. I probably would not have shared pictures and other multimedia sources." In class, Michelle (Summarizer) surprised herself and us when she remembered a friend who had visited Alcatraz. She used her smartphone then to access his Facebook page and show us a picture of him lying in a bunk bed in an Alcatraz cell.

Two comments attest to the students' positive feelings about this digital assignment. Michelle (Summarizer) wrote, "I did a lot of extra research to answer my questions, but it felt like I was browsing of my own free will and on my own time. Doing my homework for this project was fun and didn't feel like schoolwork at all." And Susan (Vocabulary Enricher) wrote, "Searching online for definitions and images of the words is fast, fun, and easy."

Although the purpose of this assignment was for these students to use the Internet and digital resources to complete their roles, I also hoped they might see value in using digital technologies in their own classrooms one day. Both in our discussion and their written responses, I saw evidence of students' awareness of some of the possibilities of using digital assignments with elementary-age children. For example, Traci (Literary Luminary) said, "This project helped me understand the importance of incorporating technology into learning," and Nick (Mapmaker) said, "...connecting geography knowledge available from the Internet to a story can improve children's comprehension." Michelle (Summarizer) and Julia (Illustrator) both noted that this approach could be a way to differentiate instruction for children.

The major drawback to these literature circles was the lack of technology in our university classroom. Melissa (Investigator) noted this when she wrote that our discussion was not "uniquely digital" since we lacked a computer or SMART Board. Melissa said, "Had there been a computer available, I could have guided the class through an exploration of the webpage, showed them all the interesting things I found, and explored links that others might find intriguing." A lack of sufficient technology is also

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“Collaboration among library media specialists, computer teachers, and classroom teachers might be explored...”

a problem in many elementary schools today. Thus, students concluded that proper classroom technology is important so assignments like this can be totally multimodal and digital.

Students also discussed other potential problems classroom teachers might face with assignments like this one. For example, many children may not have Internet access at home and would need time with school computers and Internet access there to complete their roles. Students also noted the need for children to possess critical digital literacy skills. Melissa (Investigator) cautioned that since information from the Internet is not always reliable, teachers need to teach children how to be critical users, especially in determining a website’s reliability.

Students also talked about the role of computer room personnel and/or library media specialists to collaborate with teachers to provide instruction in keyboarding and critical digital literacy skills. Lastly, students talked about the potential problem of blocked access to certain sites by schools and/or parents, and they related this to obtaining parental permission for children to use a school’s computers so everyone can participate digitally.

Suggestions for the Classroom

The students concluded that assignments like this one offer the possibility of motivating elementary-age children to read and allowing children to use multimodal and digital resources

to respond to literature. Results of this digital assignment with these pre-service teachers supports research evidence and professional opinion that “remixing” tradition instruction with multimodal texts and new literacies can motivate and promote engagement in learning (Lapp, Moss, & Rowsell, 2012; Whitin, 2009). Thus, we make five suggestions for classroom teachers who want to try digital literature circles:

1. *Obtain permission for Internet access.* These students did not need parental permission. However, written parental permission is necessary in many schools before children can participate in an assignment like this one. Parents might be reminded that assignments like this one provide supervised experiences with digital literacy, to which some children may not have access at home. In addition, teachers should check their school’s policy on blocked sites and request a waiver if necessary for assignments like this one.
2. *Provide appropriate classroom technology.* The students concluded that in order for assignments like this one to be totally multimodal and digital, children need access to computers and the Internet. While these students used a variety of digital resources, the key ingredient for digital sharing was missing. However, with a hybrid literature circle like the one described here, printed copies of Internet research

can be shared with a document camera and screen as we did.

3. *Provide instruction in navigation skills.* Students noted that children need to possess digital literacy skills in order to have positive multimedia experiences (e.g., keyboarding, spelling, scrolling, scanning, cutting, pasting). So, collaboration among library media specialists, computer teachers, and classroom teachers might be explored as one way to achieve this outcome.
4. *Provide instruction in critical digital literacy.* Children need instruction in how to determine the currency, accuracy, and authenticity of a website. When Melissa (Investigator) talked about the challenge of finding reliable websites, students agreed that children need to learn about this aspect of the Internet. Initially, it is important for children to learn about sites that may hold more reliable information (e.g., .edu, .gov, .org sites) than others (e.g., .com sites).
5. *Use digital assignments to differentiate instruction.* Matching children to roles that may suit them best by connecting with an interest

TAKE ACTION!

1. Give students a choice in the book they will read for literature circles by introducing a few books with brief book talks.
2. Collaborate with your library media specialist and/or computer teacher to teach students navigation skills and how to assess a website’s credibility.
3. Provide students with a list of other possible ways to complete a literature circle assignment (e.g., iMovie, Glogster, Animoto, Kidspiration).

or strength can be beneficial. Differentiating instruction in this way can potentially spark interest and even result in research that uncovers information not typical in traditional role assignments. Children may find more information, spend more time, enjoy themselves, and learn more than we realize when a role fits them.

Finally

Digital assignments like this one gave students in this children's literature class an opportunity to use technology in a variety of ways to dig deeper into a book and share what they learned with each other. Students were curious, pursued their own questions, and used their research to support and extend discussion as they broadened each other's understanding and appreciation of literature. Additionally, I was pleased that they connected this experience to classroom instruction in positive ways for the children they will teach one day.

MORE TO EXPLORE

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Appendix A

Student-Cited Websites

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Glogster: edu.glogster.com

Alcatraz glog: mswimpiano7.edu.glogster.com/al-capone-shines-my-shoes

Kidspiration: www.inspiration.com